

OWEN, ROBERT DALE

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# Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Robert Dale Owen

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
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# Lincoln Lore

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## Robert Dale Owen, "an intelligent, disinterested, and patriotic gentleman."

By the middle of the twentieth century, the study of slavery was thought by many to have reached a stalemate. Slaves did not leave their own written record, and the record written by their masters and by outside travellers, visitors, and observers had been milked for all it was worth. In every case, this indirect evidence boiled down to a matter of interpretation. Plantation records, for example, frequently contained complaints that slaves were sloppy workers, that they abused the animals, that they broke a lot of hoes. Historians of one political or social persuasion said that this was a form of sabotage by which slaves showed their resentment at what they knew to be their unnatural and unjust condition. Historians of another persuasion claimed that it meant that slave labor was simply unskilled and inefficient. The argument could go on endlessly because the body of fact on which the interpretation was based did not grow. There was very little new information after Ulrich B. Phillips did his pioneering work from plantation records in the 1910's.

Since that time, however, there have been two significant developments which have made the study of slavery livelier than ever. The first came with the publication in 1947 of Frank Tannenbaum's slender little volume entitled *Slave and Citizen* (New York: Knopf). Tannenbaum's idea was that something new could be said about slavery if it was examined on a comparative basis. That is, the same old facts that had been argued about for so long could be seen in a new and revealing light if they were compared to the facts from slave cultures other than that of the antebellum southern United States. The result of the application of this aperçu to studies of slavery was, by and large, the judgment that North American slavery was the harshest ever practiced in the world, that the black man in antebellum Mississippi, say, was unique in world history because of the degree to which his status had been reduced to that of a chattel, the master's private property. The North American slave had really become a thing, in short. By contrast, Brazilian slaves had lived in a Catholic country with a feudal heritage (via Spain), and they benefited from the relative strength that hoary institutions traditionally exercised over the efforts of individual citizens. The church demanded that slave marriages be solemnized, the parish priest visited the plantations to hear of abuses of slaves by masters, the punishments an

owner could mete out to his private property were limited by law, and in general the will of the individual was restrained from reducing the slave's humanity to chattel-dom.

The sort of insight that could be gained from old forms of evidence is illustrated by Stanley Elkins's controversial book *Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). He addressed the old problem of whether broken hoes meant sabotage or slovenliness by invoking the comparative perspective. North American slavery was so brutal that it resembled the conditions in Nazi concentration camps, said Elkins. In those camps there had been little rebelliousness or sabotage because the inmates had been "infantilized"; they had become virtual children with no will to resist paternal authority. This explanation accounted for the relative infrequency of slave revolts in the United States as compared to Brazil. Rebellion feeds on hope. Ironically therefore, Brazil experienced countless huge uprisings, whereas the United States had only three. The "revolts that actually did occur," said Elkins of the North American experience, "were in no instance planned by plantation laborers but rather by

Negroes whose qualities of leadership were developed well outside the full coercions of the plantation authority-system. Gabriel, who led the revolt in 1800, was a blacksmith who lived a few miles outside Richmond, Denmark Vesey, leading spirit of the 1822 plot at Charleston, was a freed Negro artisan who had been born in Africa and served several years aboard a slave-trading vessel; and Nat Turner, the Virginia slave who fomented the massacre of 1831, was a literate preacher of recognized intelligence."

The second great development in recent studies of slavery was less a result of historical insight than of technology. Historians have begun to apply modern tools of quantification to the study of slavery. Thus they can give proper statistical weight to the evidence chosen selectively by previous historians, and they can look at the institution itself more than at the description of the institution left by masters and outside observers. The results are just beginning to appear, and some of them are quite startling. Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, for example, argue in *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974) that the slave family was stable and patriarchal, that such families were



Courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society Library

FIGURE 1. Robert Dale Owen (1801-1877) was born in Glasgow but came to the United States when he was twenty-four. For years he lived at New Harmony, Indiana, where his father had established an experimental social community. In his youth, Owen worked for liberal divorce laws, equalization of wealth, and free thought, but his zeal to abolish slavery came only late in his life.



rarely shattered by the domestic slave trade, that fully 25 percent of male slaves were managers and artisans rather than field hands, that slave agriculture was profitable and more efficient than free agriculture, and that it was so because the black laborer was a good laborer and not a saboteur or slovenly incompetent.

One particular aspect of the current mania for figures has been a reevaluation of the incidence and effects of the African slave trade. The result was simple: Brazilian and West Indian slavery was sustained throughout their careers by fresh importations of African slaves. In the United States, slavery grew by natural increase. After 1808, the trade was forbidden by the constitution, and most states outlawed it well before that date. The implications of these results, however, are complicated. For one thing, they seem to reverse the insights of the original practitioners of the comparative approach: hoary institutions or no, other slave cultures seem to have burned up their slaves in five to seven years and simply ordered new ones for replacement. In the United States, on the other hand, slaves were treated paternalistically enough for the system to thrive by the natural increase of the slave population. For another, the relative incidence of slave revolts seems to be a function of acculturation rather than harshness of the regime. Africans revolted, and Americans (for most slaves in the nineteenth century United States were second, third, and fourth generation Americans) did not.

The newness and sophistication of these arguments about the nature of slavery make all the more remarkable the arguments in a book which preceded by a century the recent musings on the comparative descriptions of and the impact of the slave trade on slavery in the Western Hemisphere. The book is *The Wrong of Slavery[,] the Right of Emancipation[,] and the Future of the African Race in the United States* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1864). The author of the book was Robert Dale Owen, son of the famous British utopian reformer and former Democratic Congressman from Indiana.

The great British philanthropist's son had long ago compromised his utopian inheritance to the vanishing point, and he had never before been an enthusiast of the black man's cause. Richard William Leopold's *Robert Dale Owen: A Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940) is a portrait of a good Democrat who shared the party's typical enthusiasms for the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War, and its detestation of Negroes and abolitionists. When Indiana wrote a new state constitution in the winter of 1850-1851, Robert Dale Owen, delegate to the constitutional convention, reported the provision which forbade Negroes and mulattoes from settling in Indiana or buying real estate there. For those Negroes unfortunate enough to be left in the state after the constitutional provision passed (as it did), Owen urged a liberal appropriation of funds for "colonization," that is, voluntary exportation out of the state and to Africa.

During the Civil War, however, Owen began to run with a different crowd. As a loyal Democrat who supported the war and as a sixty-year-old man whose more partisan past seemed behind him, Owen gained an appointment on May 30, 1861 by Governor Oliver P. Morton as Indiana's purchasing agent for ordnance. This brought him into immediate contact with a governor who was a zealous supporter of the Republican cause, and it brought him into eventual contact with the War Department in Washington and its head, Edwin M. Stanton. Owen impressed Stanton enough that less than a year after his Indiana appointment—on March 13, 1862—Stanton appointed him and another War Democrat, Joseph Holt of Kentucky, as auditors of "all contracts, orders, and claims on the War Department, in respect to ordnance, arms, and ammunition."

By the autumn of 1862, Owen was badgering the administration with advice, particularly with the advice that, to avoid a military coup d'état, Lincoln should emancipate the slaves by virtue of his power as Commander-in-Chief. He also urged Congressional legislation to end slavery in the Border States by a policy of federally compensated emancipation. A year and three days after his first appointment by Stanton—on March 16, 1863—Owen had proved to be a sufficiently promising pupil of Republican reform ideas that Stanton appointed him, along with James McKaye and Samuel Gridley Howe, to the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission.

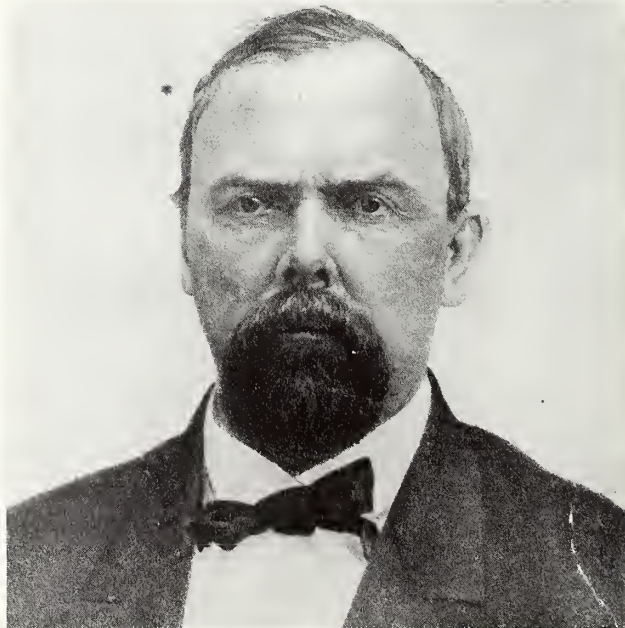
The American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, according to James M. McPherson's *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), was for the

most part the abolitionists' brain-child. For some time even before the Emancipation Proclamation they had advocated a federal bureau to formulate and administer a uniform national policy towards the freedmen. Philadelphia abolitionist J. Miller McKim was particularly insistent that a commission should be established to issue a report on the status of the freedmen. Thaddeus Stevens wanted a congressional commission, but Charles Sumner and Stanton thought an executive commission could be set up more quietly without debate in Congress. Stanton purposely avoided appointing an abolitionist of the Garrison school and made the moderate Democrat Owen the chairman of the commission.

Owen wrote the reports of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission. The final report was submitted in May of 1864, after months of travel, hearing testimony, and consultation with men who had been dealing with the problem to date. President Lincoln does not seem to have had a direct hand in the appointment of the commission, though of course he was aware of its work and aided it. On one particular occasion, Chaplain John Eaton, who had served with Grant in Mississippi and to whom Grant had disclosed his plan to colonize certain plantations with freedmen to "become a Negro paradise," called on President Lincoln in the summer of 1863. Eaton found Lincoln "keen in his investigation of the personal traits of certain Negroes, the circumstances of whose lives had brought them into prominence. He questioned me in regard to those who were coming into our lines: What was their object; how far did they understand the changes that were coming to them, and what were they able to do for themselves? At this time, it must be remembered, the Negro character was a subject about which, among Northerners, at least, the wildest conjectures were current." At the end of their second meeting the next day, Lincoln informed Eaton "that he desired me to report to a committee, composed of Dr. S.G. Howe of Boston, the well-known philanthropist, Colonel McKaye of New York, and Robert Dale Owen of Indiana, a former member of Congress. Mr. Lincoln had previously told me of this body, which, he said, had been appointed to consider the entire subject of our policy toward the Negro in the present emergency. The Commission—known officially as the American Freedmen Inquiry Commission—had recently been in conference in New York, and the President desired me to go there and meet them."

Owen's principal work for the commission was drafting its reports and doing considerable research into what today would be called black history. The final report, slightly clarified and modified, formed the substance of Owen's book, *The Wrong of Slavery*, and it was in part the embodiment of Owen's historical research.

Owen was diligent in his research. The book has footnotes in Spanish, French, and Latin. He borrowed the library of



From the Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis

FIGURE 2. Oliver P. Morton



Benjamin P. Hunt, a Philadelphian whose library was "rich in works on West Indian history and emancipation." The result was a remarkable section, comprising about half of the book, which explored the origins of slavery in the Western Hemisphere.

Owen attributed the origins of the institution largely to Spain and to the misguided philanthropy of Bartolomeo delas Casas, a Dominican monk who thought that the miseries of the enslaved Indians in Hispaniola could be alleviated by substituting "a hardier race," the Negroes from the Portuguese settlements on the African coast, as the slaves of the Spanish. Owen attributed slavery to the Spanish desire for gold and labor to mine it, but he stopped short of urging what some recent American historians have suggested: the seventeenth-century English colonists read Spanish books to know how to cope with the New World, therefore they expected to employ the Indians for labor, and they substituted blacks as early as 1619 when they found that the Indians were too recalcitrant.

On the origins of slavery in what would become the United States, Owen was vague. All he did was to repeat the charge that had become the standard salve of the American conscience: that Great Britain had somehow forced slavery on the American colonies. This charge was lifted from George Bancroft's monumental *History of the United States* and allowed Owen to evade the issue by such indirect statements as this one: "The agency of the British Government in fastening slavery upon the Continental colonies is well known." Bancroft had seized upon late-eighteenth-century protests by colonial legislatures against the continuing importation of African slaves into the colonies. By that time, of course, fresh importations decreased the value of the slaves already held in the colonies; moreover, the tobacco industry suffered from chronic overproduction which vastly depressed the price. Bancroft managed to put a more humanitarian face on what was nakedly an argument from the elite's economic self-interest by saying that the "English Continental colonies [Owen quoted Bancroft's passage] were, in the aggregate, always opposed to the African slave-trade." Owen did not question Bancroft's "always," and, though born in Great Britain himself, he concluded that "In the entire history of Great Britain there is scarcely a more disgraceful page."

All of this was conventional, but Owen's research brought him to less conventional and to less convenient conclusions. Making rough computations of the volume of the slave trade from the available sources, Owen was left with this very tough fact to interpret: "THE HALF-MILLION SHIPPED FOR NORTH AMERICA HAVE INCREASED NEARLY NINE-FOLD,—being represented in 1860 by a population exceeding four millions four hundred thousand; while THE FIFTEEN MILLIONS SENT TO THE WEST INDIAN COLONIES AND TO SOUTHERN [i.e., South] AMERICA HAVE DIMINISHED, FROM AGE TO AGE, until they are represented now by LESS THAN HALF THEIR ORIGINAL NUMBER!" Although he arrived at the same basic insight that modern writers have reached, Owen considerably overestimated the number of slaves imported into the West Indies and Latin America; his estimate for that portion of the world alone is some five million higher than the most recent estimates of the total number of slave importations including the United States. These recent estimates, however, admit to the possibility of an error as great as 20 percent. If they erred low, then Owen was some 4.2 million off. Nevertheless, Owen showed an interest in the broad view of slavery as a more than national phenomenon. The disparity in numbers between the United States's experience and that of the other areas in the Western Hemisphere was so great that even a gross computational error like Owen's could not miss the basic point: a tiny island like Jamaica or Cuba imported more slaves than the whole of the United States! There was a fundamental difference in the nature of slave societies, and it was a difference which it was *not* convenient for Owen to take note of.

After all, Owen wrote in the midst of the Civil War at the behest and in the pay of an administration that was by that time committed by a fait accompli to the policy of emancipation and to a war against slavery. The second of the three sections of Owen's book was in fact a justification of administrative emancipation policy from the standpoint of constitutional law, international law, and (at times) natural justice. It was not particularly helpful to find fairly compelling evidence that slavery as practiced in the United States was a good deal more benign than slavery as practiced anywhere else in the Western World.

Owen did in fact balk at the inevitable conclusion, but he did not blink it away. Chapter IX he entitled "Touching the Causes of Certain Marvellous Results," and there he grappled with his "results so extraordinary, at first sight so incredible,—and, in effect, even when thoroughly examined, so difficult of satisfactory explanation,—that I have devoted much time and labor to the critical revision of the materials whence my conclusions are drawn, before venturing to place them on record." The answer was not to be found "solely in the greater humanity with which the negroes of the United States have been treated, as compared with those of other slave countries." He attributed the poor rate of natural increase in other cultures to the disparity in sexes caused by relying heavily on the African slave trade. Such reliance brought greater numbers of males than females, but, Owen had to admit, female slaves were available and would have been supplied had the planters asked for them. At least the cruelty of maintaining a regime short of women had to be attributed to the other cultures, as did the cruelty which has so caught the attention of recent scholars:

The slave-trade had another, still more sinister, influence. It is beyond a doubt that wherever that trade prevailed it tended directly to aggravate the condition and to shorten the lives of the plantation slaves. This happened because it increased the temptation to cruelty and overwork.

The thorough Owen then quoted a passage from a book by two American visitors to Brazil which has found a prominent place in a recent prize-winning book on the subject (Carl Degler's *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* [New York: Macmillan, 1971], page 74): "Until 1850, when the slave-trade was effectually put down, it was considered cheaper on the country plantations to use up a slave in five or seven years and purchase another, than to take care of him. This I had in the interior from native Brazilians, and my own observation has confirmed it."

Owen's heritage of benevolence prevented him from accepting completely the evil implications of the second factor.

As to the second influence, growing out of the temptation gradually to work to death laborers who can be replaced any day by fresh purchases, it is hard to believe that it should have exerted over human cupidity so terrible a sway as to cause the reduction to seven and a half millions of men of a population which, had they been treated and had they thriven but as well as the slaves of the United States, would have numbered to-day ninety-eight millions of souls.

Owen was aware that another factor, the "habitual absenteeism of many of the proprietors" of plantations in the West Indies, left the slaves "at the mercy of overseers, often uncultivated and mercenary, who had no interest in their preservation so long as those who died could be profitably replaced by what were called 'new negroes.'" Overseers were most often unmarried men who knew little about caring for pregnant females.

Almost in desperation, Owen suggested that climate might explain the differences in the experience of slave populations. He had to admit, however, that "there is no evidence to show that the climate of the West Indies and of Brazil is less suited, or more fatal, to the negro than that of our Slave States." The most recent writers on the subject, Fogel and Engerman in *Time on the Cross*, have been forced to practically the same speculations. "To Americans who have a penchant for finding the silver linings of clouds," say Fogel and Engerman, "it is tempting to cast the explanation in terms of the relative humaneness of the treatment of slaves in the U.S. colonies." Fogel and Engerman, however, suggest the importance of the role of the "epidemiological environment" of the West Indies, where "Malaria, yellow fever, tetanus, dysentery, smallpox, and a score of other diseases were more widespread and more virulent" than in temperate climates. They also stress the disproportionately high male population in a culture that fed on the slave trade rather than on natural increase, but they do not delve as deeply as Owen on this point. That nineteenth-century student of the slave trade quoted evidence from traders that female slaves were readily available, and he did not fail to identify the cruelty of a deliberate imbalance in sexual make-up of the population.

In the end, Owen simply threw up his hands in despair. "Upon the whole, however, it must be confessed that, while the general facts in this case are indisputable, the explanations we have so far suggested seem inadequate to account for the extraordinary results we have disclosed." Owen should



not be condemned for his indecisiveness on the meaning of his population estimates. Modern authorities still disagree. Carl Degler maintains that the figures show the peculiar benevolence of the United States's peculiar institution. Fogel and Engerman call Degler's reasoning an optimistic search for silver linings and then further confuse matters by arguing in the rest of their own book that many of the evils the abolitionists denounced—disruption of the family, slave breeding farms, inefficient labor—were exceptions to the statistical rule for American Negro slavery.

Moreover, Owen had an immediate political—almost military—reason not to find any silver linings in the cloud of American slavery. He grudgingly granted “success in this country, so far as the mere physical increase of the slave population can attest the fact,” but “no further.”

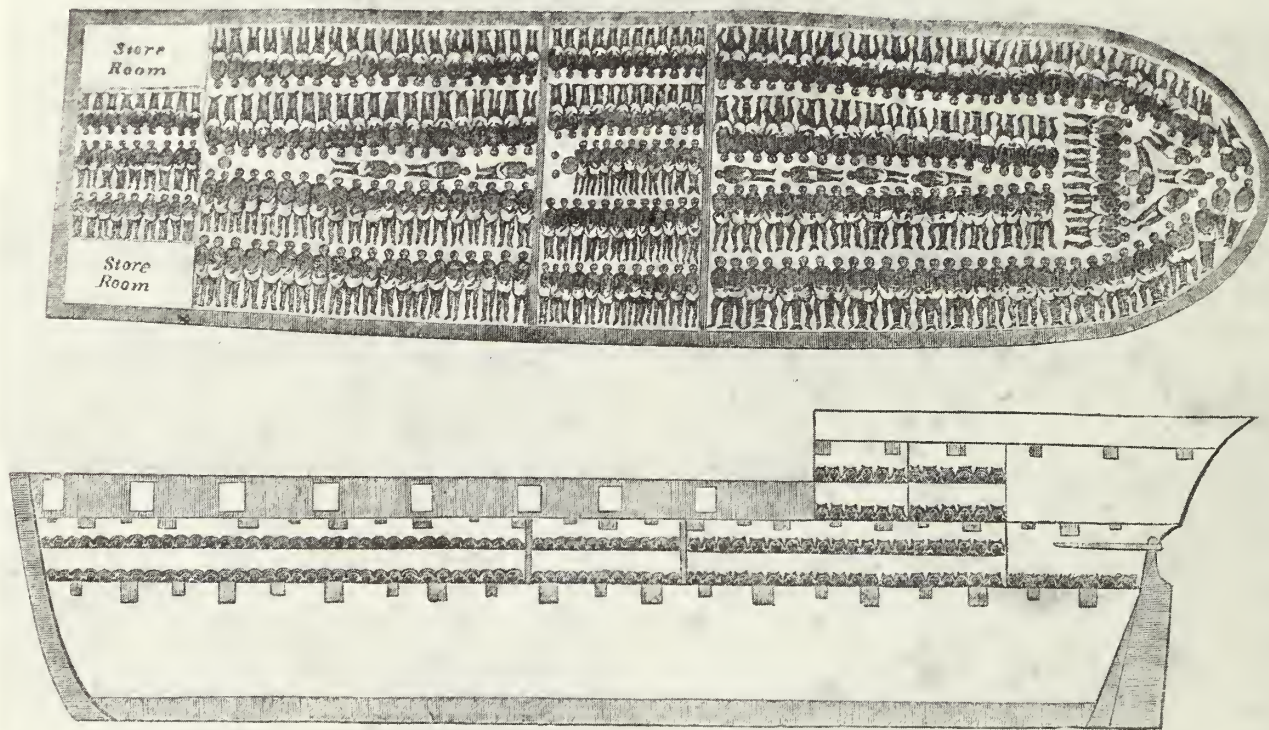
... population has increased in the world in spite of ceaseless wars, in spite of constant vice and misery. It increased in famine-stricken Ireland. It increased in England throughout the term of that feudal system which made of the island one great military camp. It increased in France throughout the centuries of that old régime of which the insufferable iniquities were at last requited by popular vengeance and culminated in the first Revolution.

Owen was an employee of the War Department. He had every reason, therefore, not to publish anything that could be construed as an apologia for the Confederate cause. It is a credit

to the independence of his intellect that he did publish the results of his research into black history.

Owen's intellect has not been much celebrated to date. His biographer, Leopold, says that he did not have “a strikingly original mind.” McPherson repeats the charge in his treatment of the reports of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission. He treats Owen's work as a mere distillation of “the results of thirty years of abolitionist research and reflection.” John G. Sproat wrote a twenty page article on the report in the *Journal of Southern History* in 1957, but he, like Leopold and McPherson, ignored Owen's treatment of the slave trade and characterized the report as standard Radical Republican fare. George Fredrickson in *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) also treats Owen's work as the distillation of a standard view of the black man in America.

Whether historians have underestimated Owen's intellect or not, they have certainly underestimated the complexity of his view of *The Wrong of Slavery and the Right of Emancipation*. He stubbornly published what his diligent historical research revealed, even though the results of that research somewhat undermined his case for emancipation and war. Owen truly lived up to Abraham Lincoln's appraisal of him (in a letter to James W. Ripley on June 22, 1861) as “an intelligent [*sic*], disinterested, and patriotic gentleman.”



DECKS OF A SLAVE SHIP.

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 3. This diagram of the lay-out of a slave ship was published in W.O. Blake's *History of Slavery and the Slave Trade, Ancient and Modern* (Columbus, Ohio: H. Miller, 1860). Quoting heavily from the “Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council, appointed for the consideration of . . . the present state of the trade to Africa,” (1789), Owen recounted the horrors of the African slave trade. One slave captain, “seventeen years in the slave trade,” said a fair average of the width allotted each slave on his decks was 14 2/3 inches. Other estimates ranged as high as 16 inches. Owen himself estimated one captain's allotment at just 12 1/2 inches.





